[NINE]

METROPOLIS (1927)

CITY, CINEMA, MODERNITY

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> One of the crucial antinomies of art today is that it wants to be and must be squarely utopian, as social reality increasingly impedes utopia, while at the same time it should not be utopian so as not to be found guilty of administering comfort and illusion. If the utopia of art were actualized, art would come to an end. THEODOR W. ADORNO, *Aesthetic Theory*

OPENING NIGHT

On January 10, 1927, all of Berlin's forty newspapers were abuzz with anticipation and excitement. *Metropolis*, the monumental new film by Fritz Lang, one and a half years in the making, was finally to open after an unprecedented advertising campaign that had run for several months. It was widely known that *Metropolis* was the most expensive and ambitious European film production to date, with an unheard-of cost of 5.3 million Reichsmark (almost four times its budget); that its shooting ratio was 1:300 (with more than 1 million meters of film exposed); and that it employed thirty-six thousand extras, including seventy-five hundred children and one thousand unemployed individuals whose heads had been shaved by one hundred hairdressers for a scene that in the final cut lasted less than a minute. Statistical hyperbole and such slogans as "a film of titanic dimensions," an "Über-film," and "the greatest film ever made, one of the most eternal artworks of all times," promised an epic film that could compete with such American spectacles as Raoul Walsh's three-hour extravaganza, *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924) or Fred Niblo's *Ben Hur* (1925), which had been shown in Berlin just a year earlier. *Metropolis* was also eagerly awaited as a sequel to Lang's successful megaproduction of 1924, the two-part *Die Nibelungen* (*The Nibelungs*), which had established him as the most daring filmmaker of the 1920s both in visual style and ideological ambition. Dedicated to

the "German Volk," *Die Nibelungen* translated the archetypal German epos into stunning images of gigantic medieval castles and prehistoric forests, built in concrete for Ufa's Neu-Babelsberg studios near Berlin (Hake 1990). Lang, who had studied architecture and painting before he turned to filmmaking, infused all of his films with a rich spatial imagination; he molded his characters and their fictional world to fit his design. Not surprisingly, it was the big-city architecture of New York that struck him first when he visited the United States in the fall of 1924:

> I saw a street lit as if in full daylight by neon lights and, topping them, oversized luminous advertisements moving, turning, flashing, on and off, spiraling ... something that was completely new and nearly fairy-tale-like for a European in those days. ... The buildings seemed to be a vertical veil, shimmering, almost weightless, a luxurious cloth hung from the dark sky to dazzle, distract, and hypnotize. At night the city did not give the impression of being alive; it lived as illusions lived. I knew then that I had to make a film about all of these sensations. (Lang 1924)

Although Lang's wife, the novelist and screenwriter Thea von Harbou, had finished the script for *Metropolis* by the summer of 1924, New York's luminous cityscape left its mark on the film's visual design and electrifying energy. Von Harbou and Lang envisioned a futuristic city as the setting for a plot that dramatized the latent social, sexual, and aesthetic conflicts of Germany in the 1920s. Extending over a broad intellectual terrain, the film drew on discourses ranging from technology, modernity, and dehumanization of labor to class, gender, and generational conflict, and finally to war and revolution. Its convoluted plot was based on von Harbou's story, which had been serialized in the *Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung* (with images from *Metropolis*) before it was published as a book at the time of the film's premiere (von Harbou 1926). Placed in the artistic and social context of the modern era, *Metropolis* is Janus-faced, looking back to the rebellion of a modernist avant-garde and forward to quiet submission under an authoritarian leader. The film displays the modernist dimension in fascism and the fascist dimension in modernity; it creates a site where modernism clashes with modernity.

After its premiere at the Ufa-Palast am Zoo, which was attended by twenty-five hundred guests, including the Reichskanzler and the leaders of finance and industry, *Metropolis* played at the refurbished Ufa Pavillon at the Nollendorfplatz for several months. The theater's exterior walls were covered with a gleaming silver coating. Brilliantly shimmering at night and faintly glistening during the day, the building radiated an eerie otherworldliness. Advertising gimmick as well as technological feat, the silvery walls projected a modernity associated with metal machinery. Futuristic technology was displayed not only in the film's fictional world but also outside, in the public space, which thus became an extension of the movie

set. On approaching the theater, Berliners were also confronted with a gigantic steel sculpture that had been taken from the film set and mounted above the entrance. The gonglike sculpture represented a beating heart, offering a humanistic counterpoint to the technical appearance of the exterior walls. The film's central conflict, between the "coldness" of modernity and the sentimentality of the heart, was alluded to even before one entered the theater.

METROPOLIS, THE FILM

Metropolis, the event, clearly overshadowed *Metropolis*, the film. After the intense publicity, expectations were so high that probably no film could have fulfilled them. The papers on the morning following the premiere were almost unanimous in their criticism, pointing out the glaring contradiction between the film's strikingly innovative visual style and its atavistic, if not reactionary, ideology. The utopian solution to the plight of the working class (namely, to be oppressed by a kinder, gentler management) seemed either too facile or too cynical, and the expressionist love story (oedipal son rebels against rich father to win the hand of a working-class girl) seemed incongruous with the film's technological fetishism.

"There is altogether too much of *Metropolis*," the exasperated film critic of *Life* commented when the film opened in New York in March 1927, only two months after its premiere in Berlin, "too much scenery, too many people, too much plot and too many platitudinous ideas" (Sherwood 1927, 24).[1] It is true that intertextual references and resonances abound. The set design, for instance, runs the gamut from cavernous Christian catacombs to abstract cityscapes in the tradition of the futurist architect Antonio Sant'Elia, from the mythical Tower of Babel to art deco interiors, from the abstract moving machine parts at the beginning of the film to the Gothic cathedral at the end. Regarding the film's most iconic images of a future city, the three set designers—Erich Kettelhut, Otto Hunte, and Karl Vollbrecht—may have been inspired by an architectural competition during 1921 and 1922 that looked for the most innovative design of a skyscraper to be built at Berlin's Bahnhof Friedrichstrasse. More than a hundred architects (among them Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Hans Poelzig, and Hans Scharoun) had presented plans for such a skyscraper, Weimar Germany's ultimate emblem of modernity (Zimmerman 1988). Although a lack of funds precluded actual construction of any entries—a problem further complicated by the fact that Berlin is built on sand, not (like Manhattan) on granite—the set designers' vision for the skyscrapers of *Metropolis* was realized in the form of models and with the help of trick photography that made the tiny set look fantastically large. The film reaches back into the mythical past and forward into the far future; its buildings stretch to the sky, while the inhuman machine halls are underground (Fig. 9.1). This overdrawn vertical structure in the tradition of

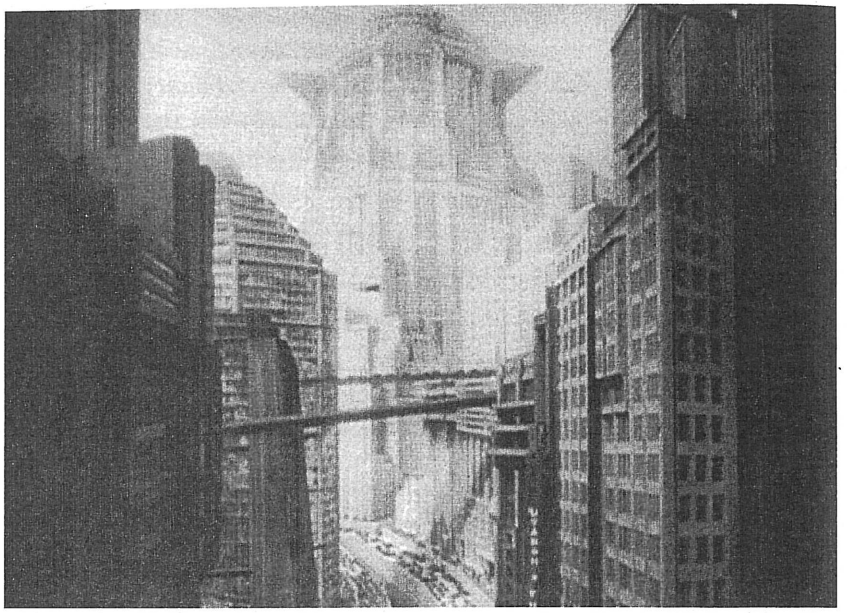

FIGURE 9.1 "Vertical veils": buildings stretch to the sky in Fritz Lang's fantasy city (*Metropolis*, 1927).

expressionist architecture is meant to underscore the contrast between the timeless pleasure gardens high above and subterranean darkness deep below, where time is measured in ten-hour shifts.

The bodies of the workers, depersonalized to the point of blending into the film's design, are choreographed in the tradition of the agitprop and *Sprechchor* (chorus) theater of Erwin Piscator. They form what Siegfried Kracauer has called a "mass ornament," in which the individual is radically submerged in highly structured formations (Fig. 9.2). Kracauer saw the same process at work in the marching columns of the military, as in the synchronized dancing style of the popular American girl revues, which mesmerized Berlin in the mid-1920s.[2] These lavish revues often featured more than a hundred dancers, all performing identical movements; they were, in his words, veritable "girl machines."[3] Less than a decade later, Leni Riefenstahl would organize the masses similarly in her documentary of the Nazi Party Congress, *Triumph des Willens* (*Triumph of the Will*, 1935).

"Metropolis, the city of the future," proclaimed the advertising material sent to the press and to movie theaters in 1927, "is the city of eternal social peace—the city of cities in which there is no animosity, no hatred, but only love and understanding" (*Metropolis* publicity brochure 1927). Having gone into production only six years after the failed workers' revolution of 1918–19, *Metropolis* is emphatically

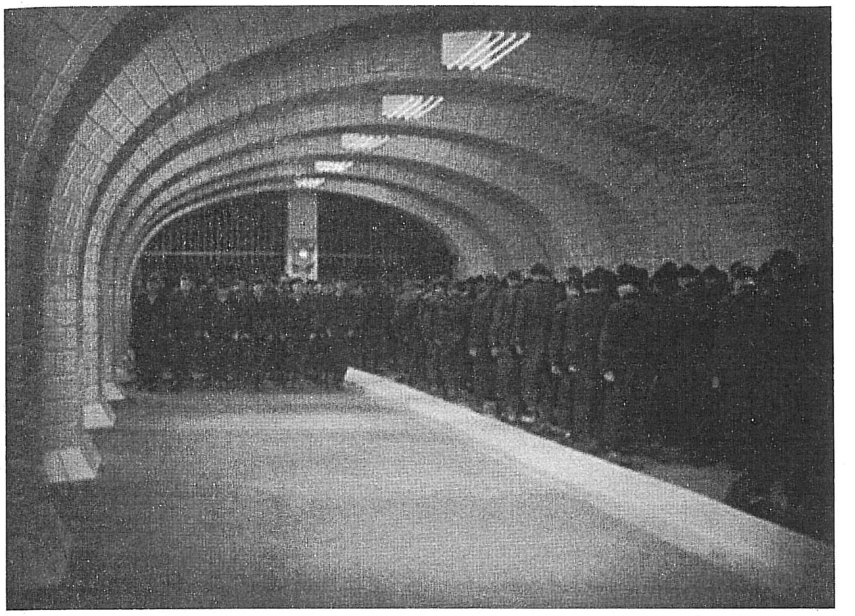

FIGURE 9.2 Workers in formation as "mass ornament."

utopian in its keen desire for social harmony. While it was true that relations between the classes had become relatively stable following the hyperinflation of 1923–24, the reconciliation between labor and management at the conclusion of the film still seemed like a contrived happy ending made in Hollywood. In an interview published in the 1960s, Lang recalled: "The main thesis was Mrs. Lang's but I am at least fifty percent responsible because I made the film. You cannot make a social-conscious picture in which you say that the intermediary between the hand and the brain is the heart—I mean that's a fairy tale—definitely. But I was very interested in machines" (quoted in Bogdanovich 1967, 124).[4]

MACHINE AESTHETICS

"But I was very interested in machines." Lang's statement reveals precisely his contribution to the novel's predictable love story. In fact, the machine represents the underlying metaphor that places the film within the 1920s discourse on modernity and technology. The city, the workers' bodies, and the film itself are all associated with the machine. The city draws its energy from machines below ground; lights flicker, and flashes of lightning shoot across the sky after the workers destroy the gigantic generator that powers the city. The city itself is organized like a

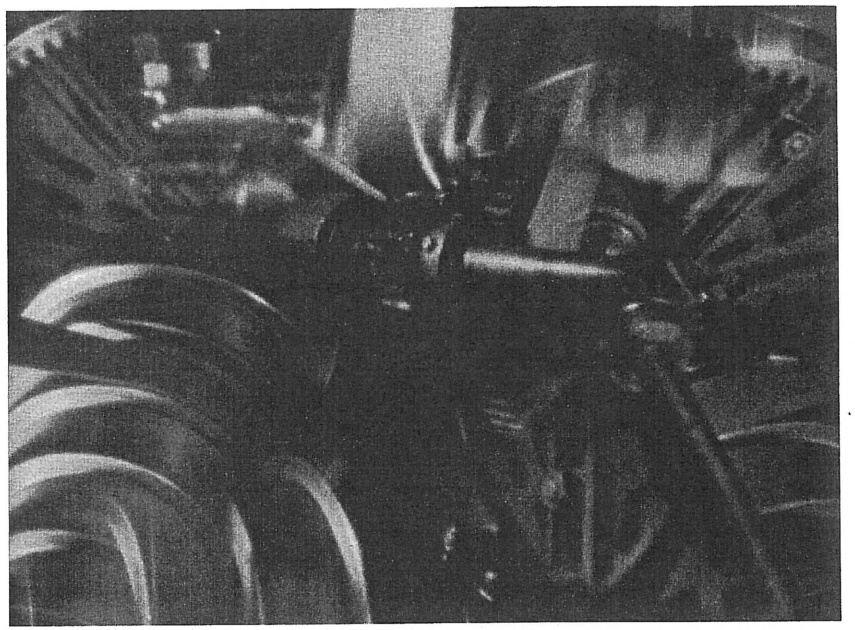

FIGURE 9.3 The machine as central metaphor for modernity.

machine that self-destructs as soon as any part malfunctions. When the workers rebel against their dehumanized status, they are presented as malfunctioning cogs in the city's machinery. Thus management's plan to replace them with robots is only logical: "Machines will be the workers of the future," proclaims Rotwang, the mad scientist.

Metropolis begins with an abstract montage of machinery in motion, set against tall skyscrapers that fill the entire frame. Close-ups of moving pistons and a turbine engine turning in opposite directions build to a crescendo as more gears and movements are incorporated (Fig. 9.3). The sequence is punctuated by the interspliced image of a ten-hour clock, yet another machine, indicating the imminent start of a new shift. The steam whistle blows, releasing the pressure that has built up, and—as a title card announces—a new shift begins. These machines move by themselves; we do not know what they produce or generate, nor do we know who set them in motion.

This fascination with mechanization, which Lang shared with Italian futurists and such avant-gardists as Fernand Léger (whose film *Ballet mécanique* appeared in 1924), also found expression in the work of Ernst Jünger, who hailed the cold elegance and metallic energy of the impersonal machine. "Only our generation begins to reconcile itself to the machine and to see in it not only the useful but the beautiful as well," Jünger wrote in 1925, referring to the front generation of World War I, which experienced the new symbiosis of human being and machine in the first technological war (Jünger 1929, 81; my translation; see also Theweleit 1989). This generation was one that dominated machines as organs of power and energy and one that transformed utilitarianism with primordial passion. The fusion of technology and vitalistic Nietzschean *Lebensphilosophie* corresponds to what Joseph Goebbels would later call "stählerne Romantik" (steely romanticism)—an intoxicating mixture of myth and modernity that Lang also embraces in *Metropolis*.

Wartime mobilization, in which the soldier subordinates his individual freedom to the demands of autocratic planning, also seemed the perfect disciplinary model for industrial production; it was Jünger's contention, expressed in his 1932 book-length treatise *Der Arbeiter* (The Worker), that one day the worker would in fact become a worker-soldier of the type that Lang depicted in *Metropolis*. Jünger's futuristic project blended feudal imagery of service and sacrifice with a modern celebration of efficiency and vitality. It was precisely the war, however, that also showed the destructive potential of modern technology, and the experience of bombing raids, machine-gun fire, and poison gas (invented and first used by Germans in 1915) informed the deep split in the 1920s between technology and humanity. As Jünger put it in his essay "Feuer und Blut" (Fire and Blood):

> The war battle is a terrifying competition of industries, and victory is the success of the competitor that managed to work faster and more ruthlessly. Here the era from which we come shows its cards. The domination of the machine over man, of the servant over the master, becomes apparent, and a deep discord, which in peacetime had already begun to shake the economic and social order, also emerges in the battles in a deadly manner. Here the style of a materialistic generation discloses itself, and technology celebrates a bloody triumph. Here a bill must be paid, one that seemed long forgotten. (Jünger 1978, 450; my translation)

In 1927 the bill was still being paid. The images of large numbers of men in dark uniforms shuffling along in formation in *Metropolis* evoked memories of soldiers marching off to the front. It was the first modern war in which machines (from machine guns to bomber planes) decided the outcome. The consequences of World War I, with nine million dead and many more wounded, were not forgotten by the mid-1920s. Millions of veterans with prostheses and mechanical body parts—half machine, half human—walked the streets, as we know from photographs, as well as paintings and drawings by George Grosz and others. The technological war and its aftermath provided the ultimate context for modernist art in Germany.

Metropolis offers a hallucinatory vision of the relationship between man and machine. The gigantic turbine that dominates the machine room transforms itself before the horrified eyes of Freder into the gaping jaws of a monster, identified in

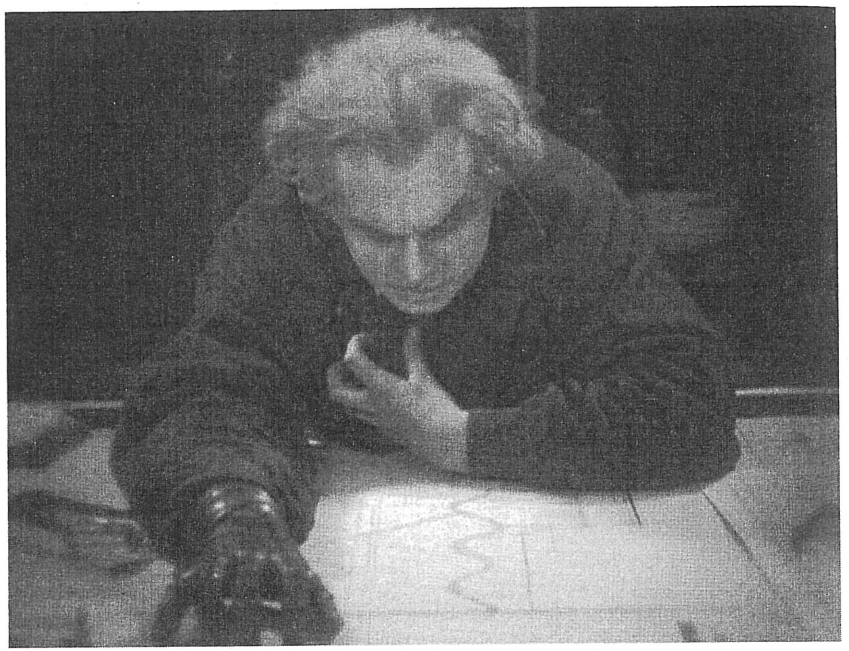

FIGURE 9.4 The inventor, engineer, and mad scientist Rotwang (Rudolf Klein-Rogge).

a title card as the biblical god Moloch. Taking the visual motif of the man-eating machine from the famous 1914 Italian film *Cabiria*, the film uses superimposition to make the machine take on the features of a fuming god.[5] This sudden metamorphosis reveals *Metropolis*'s underlying ideology, which associates machines with man-eating monsters and the inventor Rotwang with black magic. Reminiscent in both dress and demeanor of Rabbi Löw in Paul Wegener's film *Der Golem: Wie er in die Welt kam* (*The Golem*, 1920), who creates and programs the monstrous golem cyborg, Rotwang's figure equally oscillates between stereotype and occultism (note the five-pointed star on his door, a pentagram identified in von Harbou's novel as "the seal of Solomon"). The film dramatizes Rotwang's categorical outsider status by linking him to a bizarre-looking medieval house surrounded by huge skyscrapers. Inventor of the artificial human machine, as well as sorcerer and magician, Rotwang represents the repressed archaic and nonsynchronous dimension of modernity (Fig. 9.4).

"The more plain and advanced the technology," Ernst Bloch wrote in his perceptive essay "Die Angst des Ingenieurs" (The Fear of the Engineer, 1929), "the more mysteriously it intersected with the old taboo region of vapors, supernatural velocity, Golem-robots, blue thunderbolts. Thus it touched what was once thought

of as the realm of magic. An Edison is much closer to Doctor Faustus than to Herbert Spencer. Much of what the old fairy tales of magic promised has been realized by the most modern technology" (Bloch 1965, 353; see also Bloch 1977). Situated between fairy tale and high-tech machinery, the film medium was predestined to represent technical progress and modernization as the intrusion of the horrific and uncanny.

Like most science fiction films, *Metropolis* was highly self-conscious about the representation of technology, because it was technology that produced the special effects and tricks that have characterized the genre ever since Georges Méliès launched his first science fiction film, *Le voyage dans la lune* (*Trip to the Moon*), in 1902. Technology (especially the status of the camera as a machine) had long kept film in Germany from being admitted to the temple of art: how can a machine produce more than a mechanical reproduction of reality? The invention of moving pictures itself was originally seen as a fiction of science, and it may not be simple coincidence that H. G. Wells's classic science fiction novel *The Time Machine* appeared when film was born in 1895.[6]

The most stunning scene in *Metropolis*, Rotwang's transformation of the robot into the likeness of Maria, is mentioned only briefly in von Harbou's novel. In a dazzling display of both scientific and cinematic magic, a replica is created with the help of enormous machines, electricity, and chemistry—the very elements that are also needed to create a lifelike image on photographic film. The new film technology had the ability to conjure up simulacra, machine-made images indistinguishable from reality.[7] When the robot as a machine-come-to-life performs a lascivious dance before a male audience, attracting the spectators' desiring gaze and at the same time tricking them, it becomes an emblem for cinema as such: a product of technical ingenuity, an incarnation of visual pleasure, and a temptress out to deceive those who fall for the illusion of a replica (Fig. 9.5).[8]

The split of Maria into an asexual "good" Maria and an oversexed "bad" Maria, which Andreas Huyssen (1986) has perceptively analyzed, can also be read as a reworking of historical developments that von Harbou and Lang may have regarded as a threat: the emergence of emancipated and sexually liberated women, as well as organized feminist activity in the mid-1920s. The robot Maria, stylized as the "New Woman," rips the social fabric asunder, inciting the workers to rebel and seducing them into self-destructive acts. Her punishment, once she is uncovered as an agent provocateur, is to be burned at the stake. In the machine-woman-as-witch the film collapses the fear of women and machines into one. This nexus of technology, visual pleasure, and fantasy also lay at the core of modern American mass culture, which, according to some cultural critics, had seduced Germany into renouncing its classical canon of high culture. While American modernity conquered the economy, culture, and lifestyle of the entire Western world in the 1920s, German

FIGURE 9.5 The evil Maria (Brigitte Helm) as eroticized dancer.

intellectuals appeared powerless, vacillating between fascination and repulsion. Raoul Hausmann's famous sculpture, which bears a striking resemblance to the robot's head in *Metropolis*, is tellingly entitled "Mechanischer Kopf: Der Geist unserer Zeit" (Mechanical Head: The Spirit of Our Time, 1921).

"The number of people who see films and never read books is in the millions," theater critic Herbert Ihering wrote in despair in 1926. "They are all subordinated to American taste, they are made identical. . . . The American film is the new world militarism, which inexorably marches forward. It is more dangerous than Prussian militarism because it devours not only single individuals but whole countries" (Ihering 1961, 509; my translation). The fear that mass culture might be a secret American weapon, one that would enslave the world by distracting it, found a particular resonance in Germany, where cultural identity had compensated for a lack of national identity for two centuries. Linked to technology, mass consumption, and mass media, American modernity became a powerful agent in the economic and cultural modernization of Germany after the war.

AMERICAN MODERNITY

"How boring Germany is," wrote Bertolt Brecht in a short diary entry dated June 18, 1920. After finding fault with all classes of German society—peasants, middle

class, and intellectuals—he concluded, there "remains America" (Brecht 1967, 10). For Brecht, as for other young writers of the early 1920s, America was the only progressive alternative to the still semifeudal lifestyle of Germany. America, more than Russia, was consistently represented as the New World and antithesis to the Old Europe. The relationship between Germany and America was understood as a historically momentous encounter between two radically different cultures, two ways of perceiving and interpreting the world, two divergent cultural languages and systems of signs. The Berlin avant-garde around Brecht and Grosz saw American mass culture as a vehicle for a radical modernization and democratization of German life and culture. America stood for Charlie Chaplin and the movies, for jazz and the Charleston, for boxing and other spectator sports; above all, it represented modernity and the ideal of living in the present.

No other country embraced American modernity more feverishly than Germany after the war. "America was a good idea," a German intellectual remarked, looking back in 1930:

> It was the land of the future. It was at home in its century. We were too young to know it firsthand; nevertheless we loved it. Long enough had the glorious discipline of technology appeared only in the form of tanks, mines, poison gas, for the purpose of annihilating humankind. In America it was at the service of human life. The sympathy expressed for elevators, radio towers, and jazz demonstrated this. It was like a creed. It was the way to beat the sword into a plowshare. It was against cavalry; it was for horsepower. (Joachim 1930, 397–98; my translation)[9]

By the mid-1920s, however, at the beginning of a five-year period of relative political and economic stability, a noticeable shift in the image of America began to take place in Germany. It continued to represent the mass culture of jazz, sports, and cinema, but it increasingly became associated with inhuman technological progress and industrial rationalization as well. Americanism in the economic sphere meant efficiency, discipline, and control, and both the right and the left began criticizing what they considered the encroachment of instrumental rationality and cost effectiveness into all areas—even culture, which in Germany had always been defined as antithetical to the world of commerce.

Adolf Halfeld, a conservative cultural critic, states this unmistakably on the cover of his polemical book *Amerika und der Amerikanismus* (America and Americanism), published in 1927, the year *Metropolis* was released: "Indebted to tradition, the culture of Europe, in particular of Germany, is threatened by America, with its focus on materialism and the mechanization of life. Rationalization in the American example triumphs, even if it kills the human side of humankind" (Halfeld 1927; my translation). And in 1928, when asked by the avant-garde journal *Transition* about the influence of the United States on Europe, the German poet Gottfried Benn answered: "[The American] influence is enormous. There is a group of

lyric poets, who think they have composed a poem by writing 'Manhattan.' There is a group of playwrights, who think they reveal the modern drama by having the action take place in an Arizona blockhouse and by having a bottle of whiskey on the table. The entire young German literature since 1918 is working under the slogan of tempo, jazz, cinema, overseas, technical activity by emphasizing the negation of an ensemble of psychic problems." He particularly objected to "the purely utilitarian, the mass article, the collective plan," concluding, not surprisingly, by stating, "Personally I am against Americanism" (Benn 1928, 251; original in English). In Benn's view Americanism had conspired with communism in promoting collectivism and crass materialism at the expense of the German ideals of individualism and idealism, a polemical juxtaposition that structured the cultural debates of the Weimar era and also inscribed itself in *Metropolis*.

By the mid-1920s the term Americanism had come to signify two intricately related phenomena: scientific management of labor and industrial mass production (known as Taylorism and Fordism, respectively), on the one hand, and commercial mass culture, on the other. To speak of America was to evoke an image of a country in which economic productivity, technology, modernity, and democracy went hand in hand with a new urban culture. But to speak of America was also to conjure up a nightmarish picture of a materialistic, mechanized society ruled by exploitation, commercialism, and a lowbrow mass culture cynically catering to the largest possible audience. These contradictory attitudes prevailed throughout the Weimar era, with the critical view gaining dominance after the stock market crash of 1929.

Henry Ford, car manufacturer and popular philosopher, was generally regarded as the official spokesman for American big business. His 1922 autobiography, *My Life and Work*, was translated into German in 1923 and became a bible for all those who wanted to emulate America's economic success. Ford preached the gospel of scientific instrumental rationality couched in humanitarian terms. In a chapter entitled "The Terror of the Machine," he writes: "I have not been able to discover that repetitive labor injures a man in any way. I have been told by parlor experts that repetitive labor is soul- as well as body-destroying, but that has not been the result of our investigations." He goes on to explain:

> There were 7,882 different jobs in the factory. Of these, 949 were classified as heavy work requiring strong, able-bodied, and practically physically perfect men; 3,338 required men of ordinary physical development and strength. The remaining 3,595 jobs were disclosed as requiring no physical exertion and could be performed by the slightest, weakest sort of men. In fact, most of them could be satisfactorily filled by women or older children. The lightest jobs were again classified to discover how many of them required the use of full faculties, and we found that 670 could be filled by legless men, 2,637 by one-legged men, 2 by armless men, 715 by one-armed men, and 10 by blind men. (Ford 1922, 105, 108)

Ford prides himself on the employment of the deaf and mute as well as the tubercular, who, he suggests, should be used mainly outdoors. He concludes, "Yet it is not true that men are mere machines" (ibid., 209). Between 1912 and 1914, following the introduction of the assembly line, the time required to assemble a car was cut from fourteen hours to ninety-three minutes. By 1925, after further refinement and the addition of more conveyor belts, a new car rolled off the assembly line every ten seconds.

Metropolis's highly stylized, almost dancelike, image of rationalized and fully alienated labor visualizes and critiques basic principles of Taylorism and Fordism: repetitive work under the dictates of the clock is bound to create pressure that can be released only in an explosive revolution, which the film represents as a natural catastrophe on the order of an earthquake or flood. The film shows that technology's repressed Other returns with a vengeance.

THE DIALECTICS OF MODERNITY

The much-maligned ending of *Metropolis*—the reconciliation between capital and labor, which has been called simplistic, foolish, reactionary, and worse[10]—is in fact an accurate expression of contradictory German responses to modernity, technological progress, and instrumental rationality. Modernity, in Max Weber's oft-quoted definition, means above all the progressive disenchantment (Entzauberung) of the world, a result of myth and religion being superseded by rational and secular thought. Intertwined with the rise of capitalism, democracy, and mass culture, modernity had a more destabilizing effect in Germany than in France, England, and the United States because Germany lacked an established democratic tradition. Everything capitalist modernity stood for—its challenge to authority, its drive for unbridled economic competition, its disavowal of spiritual and religious values, and its commercialization of culture—collided head-on with still-intact patriarchal and authoritarian structures.

Although the German battle against modernity dates back to the mid-nineteenth century (culminating in World War I), it was the Weimar Republic, Germany's first democratically elected government, that revealed the enduring contradictions within modernity itself. In their magisterial *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*) of 1947, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno voiced the suspicion that the rationality characteristic of the joint projects of Enlightenment and modernity might rest on a logic of domination and oppression. Writing in the aftermath of two world wars, of Hiroshima and the Holocaust, they argued that the desire to dominate nature entailed the domination of human nature; the quest for human emancipation was thus transmuted and hardened into a system of universal oppression. The legacy of the Enlightenment spirit that informed modernity meant, in short, the triumph of instrumental rationality.[11]

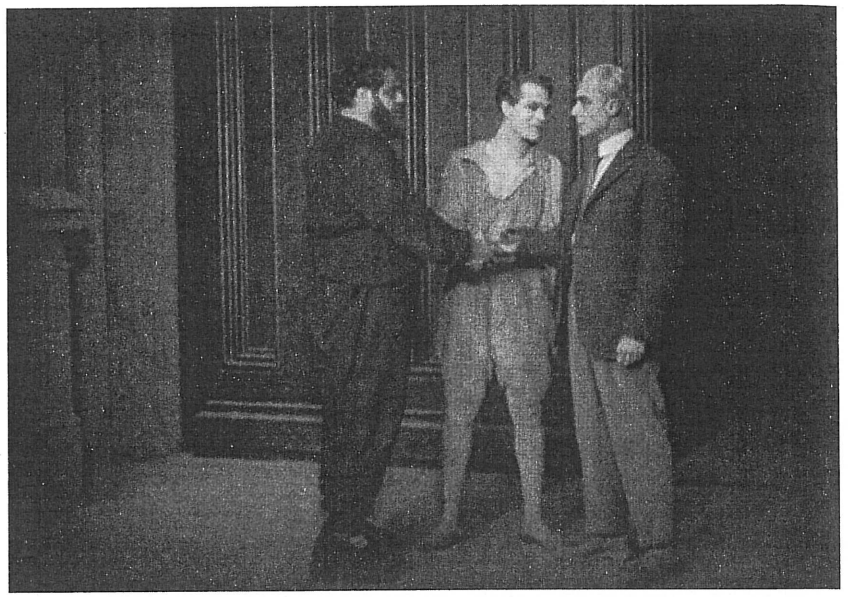

FIGURE 9.6 The much-maligned ending of *Metropolis*: the reconciliation of capital and labor.

Metropolis seeks to counter instrumental rationality with religion, idealism, superstition, irrationalism, sexual abandon, and revolutionary zeal—only to reaffirm in the end a somewhat modified instrumental reason. Both the failed socialist revolution of 1918–19 and the successful fascist takeover in 1933 responded to forces unleashed by modernity in Germany. From today's perspective *Metropolis* incorporates both reactions to modernity, the workers' revolt (in the film cynically masterminded by capital), as well as capital's reclamation of power that stands for what might be called "oppression with a heart." At the end the workers again march in formation and come to a stop only to watch their foreman shake hands with "the ruler" of the city, as the young facilitators of the social peace, Freder and Maria, look on.

Who, then, is excluded from this harmonious ending (Fig. 9.6)? Rotwang falls to his death from the rooftop of the Gothic cathedral while wrestling with Freder, and the sexualized female robot is burned at the stake. What remains is a transformed community that again embraces instrumental rationality, but it is a community that is free from vaguely connoted "Jewish" influence and uncontrolled female sexuality, infused, instead, with German spirituality (see Isenberg 1999). It is the kind of closed community (*Gemeinschaft*, not *Gesellschaft*) that reactionary modernists such as Ernst Jünger, Werner Sombart, and Oswald Spengler had valorized in their writings throughout the 1920s. *Metropolis*'s linkage of modern technology,

cultural pessimism, and totalitarian ideology prefigured the National Socialists' resolve to emancipate technology from capitalist exchange and "Jewish materialism."[12] Hitler, who once defined Aryan culture as a synthesis of "the Greek spirit and Germanic technology" (Jäckel 1972, 28), did not oppose modernity in contrast to völkisch ideologues. Goebbels summed up the official Nazi position on technology in a speech at the opening of the Berlin Auto Show on February 17, 1939:

> National Socialism never rejected or struggled against technology. Rather, one of its main tasks was to consciously affirm it, to fill it inwardly with soul, to discipline it and to place it in the service of our people and their cultural level. We live in an age that is both romantic and steel-like, that has not lost its depth of feeling. On the contrary, it has discovered a new romanticism in the results of modern inventions and technology. While bourgeois reaction was alien to and filled with incomprehension, if not outright hostility to technology, and while modern skeptics believed the deepest roots of the collapse of European culture lay in it, National Socialism understood how to take the soulless framework of technology and fill it with the rhythm and hot impulses of our time. (quoted in Herf 1984, 196)

This romanticized vision of modernity was meant to obscure the contradictions of a regime that built high-tech weapons systems while insisting on the values of blood and soil.

Metropolis's ideological trajectory is part of a larger debate among German sociologists and philosophers about the "intellectual and spiritual revolution," which, as Ernst Troeltsch stated in 1921, was a "revulsion against drill and discipline, against the ideology of success and power ... against intellectualism ... against the big metropolis and the unnatural ... against the rule of money and prestige" (quoted in Ringer 1969, 346). This reaction against capitalist modernity was itself perceived as revolutionary and utopian in the 1920s. Troeltsch put his hopes for a spiritual renewal in the young, as did Lang in *Metropolis*.

Lang's *Metropolis* offers one of Germany's most fascinating and complex contributions to the vigorous 1920s discourse on modernity. Its message is ambivalent, suggesting that the undoing of modernization and technological progress would bring only self-destruction. This ambivalence is evident in the images that fetishize technology even as they display its cataclysmic power. The machine is the object of fascination and terror, of savagery and myth; its faceless and unlimited power clashes with a narrative that challenges the dehumanization of industrial production. The violent utopia in the plays of Georg Kaiser's *Gas I* (1918) and *Gas II* (1920), as well as Ernst Toller's *Die Maschinenstürmer* (The Machine Wreckers, 1924), which advocated the destruction of machines to achieve a new humanism, had itself become dystopian in the advanced technocratic society of 1920s Germany.

After the military defeat and the failed socialist revolution, the Weimar Republic tried hard (especially during the postexpressionist period of "new objectivity") to discard all utopian ideas of German expressionism—in particular its unrealistic and old-fashioned emphasis on the "heart" (and, in a wider sense, on community and humankind) and its rebellion against unrestrained instrumental rationality. These utopian ideals, however, did not vanish. As *Metropolis* illustrates, they could be reactivated as an antidote to unlimited progress and technology. Lang stages the oedipal struggle between an "expressionist" son and his "Americanist" father to make a larger point about the failed project of modernity. The idealism of *Metropolis* should be seen, then, not as a "fault" of the film but as a historically explainable attempt to fight those tendencies of modernity that have undeniably shown themselves to be cruel and dehumanizing. Viewed in its historical context, the film thus dramatizes the protest of German modernism against an overpowering modernity—a modernity that had undermined and negated its emancipatory and utopian potential.

NOTES

1. *Metropolis*, which had an original running time of 153 minutes, was shortened for the American release by Paramount to a "normal" length of 120 minutes. Ufa followed this version after its opening; thus, approximately thirty minutes of the film are lost. Enno Patalas has produced a restored version that seeks to substitute the missing parts by providing explanatory titles from the screenplay and censorship cards. My analysis is based on the restored version (Transit Film) in German from 2003. A "restored authorized edition," with the original 1927 orchestral score and English intertitles, was made available by Kino International in 2002; it runs 124 minutes.
2. "The structure of the mass ornament reflects that of the general contemporary situation. Since the principle of the capitalist production process does not stem purely from nature, it must destroy the natural organisms which it regards either as a means or as a force of resistance. Personality and national community perish when calculability is demanded" (Kracauer 1975, 69).
3. See Kracauer 1931. The workers' automated movements also recall the "mechanical ballet" performed, for instance, by Oskar Schlemmer's Triadic Ballet at the Bauhaus theater in the early and mid-1920s.
4. For the production history of *Metropolis* and interviews with Lang, see also Gehler and Kasten 1990; and Patalas 1986.
5. Chaplin alludes to this motif in a more playful, fairy tale–like way in a scene from *Modern Times* (1936) in which the machine he operates first devours him and then spits him out.
6. On *Metropolis* within the context of science fiction and utopia in Germany see Fisher 1991; and Müller 1989, 212–17.

7. On the importance of the motif of the machine-woman in Auguste de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's 1886 novel *L'eve future* for cinema see Michelson 1987; and Bellour 1986.
8. For a discussion of the sexual politics of *Metropolis* in general and the nexus between machine and female sexuality in particular see Wollen 1989; Dadoun 1986; Huyssen 1986; Jenkins 1981; and Mellencamp 1981.
9. On the extensive debate over cultural Americanism see Kaes 1983, 265–86; see also Kaes 1988. On Americanism in the economic sphere see Maier 1970.
10. H. G. Wells, for instance, begins his 1927 review as follows: "I have recently seen the silliest film. I do not believe it would be possible to make one sillier. ... It gives in one eddying concentration almost every possible foolishness, cliché, platitude, and muddlement about mechanical progress and progress in general served up with a sauce of sentimentality that is all its own" (quoted in Geduld 1972, 59).
11. See Horkheimer and Adorno (1972); see also Habermas 1987; and Zimmerman 1991.
12. The relationship between Fritz Lang and National Socialism is still under debate. Hitler and Goebbels liked *Die Nibelungen*, as well as *Metropolis*, and wanted to make Lang the head of the entire Nazi film production in 1933. He declined and went to Hollywood instead. His passport shows, however, that he actually returned to Germany on brief sojourns after 1933 (see Werner 2000; and Winkler 1990).

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